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## THE PRACTICAL VALUE OF THE SCIENCE OF COMPARATIVE RELIGION.<sup>1</sup>

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IN this utilitarian age and country it cannot be expected that many will pursue learning for its own sake, regardless of any practical advantage to accrue from it. When any new study is in view, the first question will always be: "Of what use is it?" We propose, therefore, to consider the practical value of comparative religion to the theologian and to the educator. It may be said that both classes have thus far succeeded in fulfilling their functions satisfactorily without its assistance; but I answer that we are living in a new age, and that the same changes in human society which have made its existence a possibility have made it almost a necessary factor in the labors both of clergymen and pedagogues.

One of the most important duties of the Christian clergy, taken as a body, is the conversion of the non-Christian world. There are some who decry foreign missions, on the ground that there is missionary work in abundance to be done nearer home. But our home paganism is far more obstinate and wilful, and by so much more difficult to eradicate, than the paganism which bears the name. The people who inhabit the slums of our great cities have, as a rule, some notion of Christianity, and often a good deal of contempt and hatred for it, and many of those in all grades of society who disclaim the Christian name have their heart and intellect hardened against Christian propagandism. But the pagan peoples are, as it were, lying fallow, ready to receive the seed of Christian enlightenment.

Although so much work has been done in the foreign missions, the impression thus far made upon the great lump of the

<sup>1</sup> See the BIBLICAL WORLD, November, 1897, pp. 342-9.

world's paganism is but slight. One reason for this is that the missionaries have not, in most cases, been sufficiently in touch with those among whom they labored. Very often, especially in Asiatic lands, they have fallen into the great blunder of judging the indigenous religion by the crude popular notions and superstitions with which they have come in daily contact, and which they not infrequently so misunderstood as to think them much worse than they really are.

Now it happens that many of the Asiatic systems have, either in their typical form or in some of their variations, a considerable amount of spirituality and numerous points of contact with Christian thought. In China, for example, while the popular worship is idolatrous and the religion of the masses is little more than a mixture of spiritism and sorcery, Confucius, in his own real teachings, which are circulated through the medium of the schools which dot the empire, represents the same moral law that Moses expounded, and may well be considered like him a schoolmaster to prepare the way for Christ. There is, moreover, a groundwork of unaccented monotheism there in the venerable worship of the Lord of Heaven (Shang-Te); and one of the most ancient and widespread of native traditions is a hint of the incarnation. Chinese Buddhism, too, has many Christianizing features, especially in the worship of Amitâbha, whose name signifies "Boundless Glory," and who is also called "The Eternal One," and of his daughter Kwan-yin, "The Goddess of Mercy," often represented, like the Madonna, with a child in her arms. Mâritchi, a "goddess of heaven" worshiped both by Buddhists and Taoists in China, is supposed by some scholars to be identical with the virgin Mary and to have been brought into the pantheon from Christian sources. In India, among the numerous sects of Hinduism, many approximate far more closely to Christian teaching than others do. While the dominant forms are pantheistic in tendency, some of the sects, like the Madhva Vishnuites, assert positively the eternal distinction of the three factors in religion: God, the soul, and the universe. And, while many sects hold to the all-importance of knowledge, or of good works and ceremonial observances, many of the

most popular ones, especially those which are worshippers of Krishna, attribute salvation to faith, or *bhakti*, alone.

It is not necessary to multiply illustrations. In some cases, as in the religion of the Parsis, the approximation to Christianity is far closer than in the instances to which I have referred. But it can be seen at a glance that, by taking hold of the points of resemblance between the rival creeds and working from them as a basis, much more can be done than in any other way toward accomplishing the triumph of Christianity. That is the fundamental condition of a successful propagandism. Nothing is ordinarily gained by assuming a position directly antagonistic to the whole mode of thought and intellectual atmosphere of the people with whom one is dealing; by so doing one simply arouses them into active hostility, kindles all their ancestral prejudices, and makes it impossible for anything which may be said to receive from them a moment's consideration. The truly wise and devoted teacher will patiently and sympathetically untangle the golden thread of truth from the worthless warp of error, in order to weave them again into a garment of light. He fears to rend beneath his foot the whole fabric of the miserable garment, foul though it be, lest perchance the poor soul that wore it may be left to shiver unclothed upon the highway of thought.

The application of this principle to the propagation of Christianity is all the more easy if it be held, with many scholars, that every form of paganism is a mutilated and corrupted outgrowth of a primeval religion which formed the first stage in the history of the church of God; the religion of the early patriarchs, and of the non-Judaic saints like Melchisedec and Job; a religion based upon a revelation of divine truth made in the beginning to Adam, just as the second dispensation was based upon the Mosaic and the third upon the Christian revelation. If this theory be true, the work of the Christian missionary is to lead back the pagan to the religion of his own ancestors, in its ultimate beauty and glory. When put in this light, his efforts cease to appear an impertinence, and he can no longer be looked upon as a mere foreign interloper and a preacher of strange gods. But in order to carry on the policy which such a view of his

mission suggests, it will be necessary for him to make a patient, thorough, and systematic study of the religion and the sect to which the objects of his beneficent endeavors adhere. This he should be able to do, or at least to begin to do, before he enters the field of his labors; and even if he undertakes to acquire upon the spot, by intimate association with the people, a perfect knowledge of their religious worship and traditions, the aid of hierological science will still be necessary, to enable him to interpret the facts and traditions which he learns, and to see their real relation to the truth of which he is an apostle.

But it is not the foreign missionary alone who needs the aid of this all-important science. Every minister of religion in our country and time is likely any day to come into contact with the representatives of rationalizing systems, and even of the pagan cults themselves. Those who reject Christianity almost invariably shelter themselves under the shadow of the great non-Christian cults, such as Confucianism, Mazdeism, Buddhism, Hinduism, Mohammedanism, etc., which they assert to be equal, if not superior, to it. Not only men of wide reading, more or less familiar with the tenets generally ascribed, with some degree of correctness, to those systems, but many of the most meager education and in the plainest walks of life, who have been infected with the anti-Christian spirit, will make use, in a blundering way, of the same kind of argument.

The development in Christian communities of a pagan propagandism, open or concealed, is one of the most remarkable signs of the times. That such a propagandism exists no observer of contemporary thought can deny. Some systems are widely prevalent among us which are of a distinctly pagan character, though sometimes bearing the Christian name. Such is Spiritism, commonly, but most inappropriately, called Spiritualism, which is simply demon-worship and a revival of the animism which characterizes almost all of the lowest savages of the world. Such, again, is the so-called "Christian Science," which is fundamentally pantheistic in all its forms, and in some of them consciously approaches to the Vedantism of India. On the other hand, Buddhism and Mohammedanism already have

some open adherents among us, and in New York there are actually at this moment American congregations which profess those religions. "Theosophy," in the sense of the movement inaugurated by Mme. Blavatsky and Colonel Olcott, occupies a medial position, professing to adhere to the esoteric tradition underlying all religions, but practically being a broadly eclectic paganism, based, in part, upon the psychological and cosmological speculations of the Northern or Tibetan Buddhism. Besides these elements of the neo-pagan movement, there are numerous obscure sects of recent origin and of similar tendencies, corresponding roughly to the Gnosticism which prevailed in the early centuries of Christianity.

The clergy cannot shut their eyes to these facts without serious detriment to their usefulness. While engaged in supporting missions to pagan lands, they must not neglect to fortify themselves to resist the encroachments of paganism in our own midst. And the only way by which they can do this is by as thorough as possible a study of the science of religions.

But comparative religion is not only indispensable to the missionary and to Christian workers at home; it is of great importance to educators generally, as an instrument of intellectual and moral culture. The distinguishing mark of culture, as opposed to mere learning, is breadth. One man may be extremely learned without being a man of intellectual culture. Another may be a man of unusual culture, and yet by no means a learned man. Culture broadens a man's outlook upon the universe and enlarges the domain of his sympathies. The savage knows of no world but the little scene of his daily experience of war and self-gratification. So it is with the ignorant peasantry of our own Christian lands. But culture opens up in every direction the worlds of space, the worlds of history, and the worlds of thought, until the horizon stretches out to infinity.

Once our ancestors thought that Christendom was the world, and that the world was the universe. Now we know that the world is but the tiniest speck upon the bosom of a space incalculably vast, filled with suns and worlds and systems besides which our planet, and our sun, and our solar system are verily

insignificant. And, in like manner, the knowledge is dawning upon us that but a small part of the population, or the learning, or the art, or the thought of the world can be counted within the limits of the Christian commonwealth of nations. We cannot know the world in which we live, and with every part of which we are daily being brought into closer and closer contact by the inventions and enterprises of modern civilization, unless we acquire, at least, some general conception of the great religions which dispute with ours the supremacy over the life and thought and aspirations of humanity. The day is fast approaching when a man can no more be considered cultured who is ignorant regarding their main outlines than he now could be were he ignorant of the structure of the solar system and the vastness of the stellar universe.

Those who believe that education should center around, or at least include, the teaching of religion must recognize, in view of the changing complexion of modern society, that the very children should be taught something regarding the principal religions and types of religion in the world, with an explanation of the relation in which the false ones stand to the true, and of the reasons why we accord our allegiance to Christianity in preference to any of the others.

When we realize, not only the important bearing of hierology upon science and philosophy and learned research, but its practical importance for the broadening of the mind, the universal propagation of divine truth, and an effectual resistance to the propagandisms of error, we shall begin to take up this study with the seriousness and earnestness which so all-important a subject demands.